

Casual Commentary

What of the Next Generation of Transport Pilots? : The Closing of Aldermaston : Why Not a Government-sponsored Training Scheme?

By ROBERT CARLING

SURPRISINGLY little fuss seems to have been made about the closing of Airways Training at Aldermaston. No doubt it was politically inexpedient for the Corporation or the Ministries to say very much at the time of the announcement, and wheels appear to have been revolving within wheels for some little time. Nobody outside—and probably very few people inside—could give an accurate and quite unbiased account of the reasons for the establishment of the organization in the first place on such a magnificent and expensive scale, or, so relatively soon afterwards, for the sudden removal of support by one of the Corporations. Then, to muddle the entire issue still further, there was the unhappy appearance of this subsidized, virtually State-supported training centre competing, in outside appearance at least, with private enterprise.

I don't profess to know anything about the politics of the affair, but certain things are obvious to anyone. First of all, we are going to need, and need very badly, just such an airline training centre within the next five years. How else are the gaps among transport pilots, caused by retirement, to be satisfactorily filled by the right sort of people?

Secondly, those who planned the centre must have had their eyes wide open to the requirements and costs of such training facilities, and must surely have known what they were doing when they agreed to pay, for instance, the six-figure rent asked for the airfield and buildings. Flying staff requirements could hardly have changed so much in a matter of twelve months that the whole thing was to be considered the grandest possible investment at one moment and the most insane extravagance the next.

Thirdly, the unfair competition argument doesn't really hold water because the kind of training to be provided at Aldermaston could not possibly have been paid for by privately financed trainees—or even, for that matter, provided by private enterprise—unless a clear-cut contract, covering a period of years, could have been agreed.

Airlines Prefer Own Training

The idea offered for public consumption towards the end of the life of the establishment—that Dominion, colonial and foreign airline operators might find such a training centre useful—was surely a little naïve. Admittedly there was, at least in the earlier years, no difficulty in finding oversea customers for the Empire Test Pilots' School, even at a very high fee, but the situation there was rather different in that it was the only school of its kind in the world, and certainly the only one where modern jet fighters and heavy bombers could be flown. The average large airline operating company, with its own fleet of aircraft, would prefer to do its own general and instrument training, using the type of aircraft which the trainees would eventually fly. Maybe, if it had been possible for Airways Training to offer complete training facilities in all modern aircraft types from Constellations and DC-6s downwards, there might have been a rush of custom, but heaven knows what the fees would have needed to be to cover the costs.

Nevertheless, there is the need for an airline training centre, and the need will become more and more obvious as the years go by. Re-launched on a less gargantuan scale, such a centre would surely be less extravagant, even for Corporation training alone, than the separate affairs which are at present in operation at Hum and, I believe, at Cranfield. Given centralization and a pooling of instructional resources its operation should be less expensive than the individual schools and it could be used for a number

of other purposes. I cannot see that the training requirements of the three Corporations are so very unlike each other that such centralization would be impracticable—any more than I can see that project, development and long-range planning should require separate huddles by boffins in four or five different places. No doubt B.O.A.C., B.E.A., Ministry of Supply and Ministry of Civil Aviation planners and researchers get together from time to time and tell each other on the telephone about their different ideas, but for all we know they may well be making individual efforts towards the same ends.

Cost and Common Sense

Not that centralization is necessarily a virtue. We have already found to our cost that it must be qualified with common sense. Small units may sometimes be wasteful, but their very smallness ensures that all the relatively few people involved in each case feel that they are part of the total effort and will consequently give of their best. So often in large organizations bright little lights are hidden for ever beneath the bushel of jealousy, and underneath the total weight of the bureaucratic pyramid. When young Smith's good idea has to pass upwards through the filing trays of various higher grades before it reaches the desk of the Director of This and That there is far too ample an opportunity for the goodness to evaporate, while the frustrated Smith, unless he is of heroic stuff, becomes a mere backroom clock watcher. In the case of a training establishment centralization might need to apply only to the premises and the equipment.

Of course, the most obvious solution to the major problem of pilot-supply would be for the Ministry of Civil Aviation (perhaps) to operate a school—sub-contracting the training as deemed expedient—partly or wholly at the public expense and as a public service. With scholarships and all the rest of it this school, or series of schools, would take pupils who elected to make airline or charter flying their career. After a two-year or three-year course the embryo captains would be turned out fit to fly anything anywhere, and the airline companies would then make their own arrangements for specialized or line training just as they do now.

There might, no doubt, be criticism from the Air Council, who would not like to see their Service flying "material" being diverted in this way. But the civil pilots would not necessarily be lost as prospective war pilots and it might even be practicable to come to an arrangement whereby a proportion of the time of training would be spent at Service establishments, and each pupil, thereafter, placed on the reserve. Certainly, I have always felt that a few years in the R.A.F. does not necessarily make an ideal airline captain and that it was absurd to depend on the Service for the supply of reasonably experienced pilots.

There would also be a number of incidental advantages to such a scheme. For instance, the Ministry of Civil Aviation might use the available facilities for instrument-rating and licensing checks, thus, at one blow, providing something more suitable for the purpose than the rather absurdly limited M.C.A. fleet of the present, and keeping the new generation of pilots abreast of all actual and possibly-to-be developed requirements.

One can clearly foresee at least a dozen ways in which the knitting together of theoretical, practical day-to-day, and initial training experience would be similarly valuable.